

The young widow stared as though she had been stung by an adder. Casting one fierce glance at her evil xiblo tormentor, she yielded to the unreasoning rage under whose influence she two handkerchiefs to tatters and shattered cups. Snatching the book from her pocket, she flung it at his feet with a shrill, jeering laugh.

"There, take it, you obstinate fool," she cried, troubling convulsively from head to foot. "I congratulate you on the delightful acquisition. Bear the disgrace, which it will disclose with what dignity you can summon."

She darted through the corridor and down the stairs, then they heard the door of her room close with a heavy crash behind her.

The professor looked after her with an expression of mingled amusement and contempt; then he examined for a moment the coarse covers of the book, while Felicitas's eyes rested with the most intense anxiety on the fingers thrust between the pages, which might open them at any moment. His features expressed anxious thought and painful suspense—the widow's last words had not surprised him, he had evidently expected some such end of the unpleasant scene; the only point to be ascertained was the form in which the presaged disgrace would confront him. Suddenly he looked up into Felicitas's pleading brown eyes—what power they possessed over the stern man! It seemed as though a gentle hand passed over the frowning brow, smoothing its wrinkles, while a half smile hovered about his lips.

"Now I will call you to account," he began. "You have deceived me most shamefully. While you faced me upstairs with an air of integrity, to whose truth I would have sworn, you had one of the secrets of the Hellwig family in your pocket. What am I to think of you, Fay? You can atone for this abominable duplicity only by answering my questions without reserve."

"I will tell you everything I can, but then I beg you—oh, I beg you most fervently, give me the book!"

"Is this really my proud, defiant, unyielding Fay, who entreats me so sweetly?"

At these words from the professor, Heinrich wisely made a noiseless retreat, but sat down in positive terror on the first flight of stairs, and clasped his gray head in his hands, as if to make sure, after what he had just heard, that it actually remained in its place.

"So you went up to-day to my aunt's room to get this book?" asked the professor.

"Yea."

"By what way? I found all the doors locked."

"I went over the roofs," she answered, reluctantly.

"That is, through the attic rooms?"

Felicitas blushed. Though she was now relieved from all suspicion of any evil design, her manner of entering seemed clandestine.

"No," she said, in much confusion; "there is no way through the upper rooms. I climbed out of the garret window opposite and came across the roofs."

"In this frightful storm?" he exclaimed, turning pale. "Felicitas, your determination is terrible!"

"I had no choice!" she replied, smiling bitterly.

"And why were you so resolved to obtain possession of the book?"

"I considered it a sacred legacy from Aunt Cordula. She once told me that the little gray box—at that time I was ignorant of its contents—must die before her. Death came upon her unexpectedly, and I felt sure it had not been destroyed. Besides, I know it lay hidden in the secret compartment which contained the silver, and I could not point out that place of concealment without letting the book fall into the wrong hands."

"Poor child, how anxious you must have been! And all this heroic self denial has been vain; the book has nevertheless fallen into the 'wrong hands.'"

"Oh, no, you will give it back to me!" she pleaded, in a deadly terror.

"Felicitas," he said, in a grave, commanding tone, "you will now answer me two questions truthfully. Do you know the precise contents of this volume?"

"Partly—since to-day."

"And do they compromise your old friend?"

The young girl was silent. If she replied in the affirmative, perhaps he would return the book and permit it to be consigned to destruction; but then she would sully Aunt Cordula's memory, and confirm the horrible rumors of her supposed guilt.

"It is unworthy of you to seek evasions, no matter how good and pure your motive may be!" he said, sternly, interrupting the momentary pause.

"Say simply, yes or no."

"No!"

"I know it," he murmured. "Now be reasonable, and submit to what is inevitable. I shall read the book."

Felicitas turned pale as death, but she made no more entreaties.

"Do so, if you can make it compatible with your honor!" she gasped.

"You are seizing upon a secret never meant for you to know. At the moment you open that book you make the most terrible, the most prolonged sacrifices throughout a woman's life utterly valueless!"

"You fight bravely, Felicitas," he answered, quietly, "and had it not been for the last words uttered by that lady—" he nodded in the direction in which the councilor's widow had vanished—"in her fury, I would give the miserable secret back to you unseen. But I must and will know the disgrace that rests upon my name, and if the lonely occupant of the rooms under the roof was strong enough to guard it from the eyes of strangers all her life, I shall doubtless find fortitude to endure it. I am doubly constrained to probe the matter thoroughly. The branch of the Hellwig family on the Rhine is evidently in possession of the secret, possibly has some share in a rascality—though you keep silence and cast down your eyes, I see distinctly in your face that my supposition is correct. My cousin undoubtedly knew of this disgrace, and was merely startled to suddenly find it written in plain characters before her eyes. I shall have a reckoning with these hypocrites! Console yourself, Fay," he continued, gently, tenderly stroking the hair of the girl who stood before him in mute despair. "I can take no different course, though my reward were the assurance that I might instantly call you mine. I should still be forced to say 'No.'"

"I can never console myself," she cried, giving way to her grief, "for my carelessness has brought misery upon you."

"You will take comfort," he answered, earnestly, "when you see that your love will enable me to conquer every trial fate may have for me in my future life."

He pressed her little icy hand and went to his room. But Felicitas leaned her burning brow against the window and looked down into the court yard, where rushing torrents of rain were pouring as violently as if they were striving to wash away the stains of the murdered Adrian von Hirschsprung's blood from the pavement, and with it the blot upon the name of Hellwig.

CHAPTER XXVII.

An hour after the professor entered his mother's sitting-room. His face was a shade paler than usual; but his expression and bearing showed more plainly than ever the manly decision and moral strength so conspicuous in his whole appearance.

Frau Hellwig was sitting behind her asclepias plant, busily engaged in knit-

ting. Row after row grew under those plump white hands, like the rounds of a ladder leading straight to heaven—for it was a missionary stocking on which she was working.

The professor laid a small book open on the table before her.

"I have a very serious matter to discuss with you, mother," he said, "but first let me beg you to glance over these pages."

She laid down the stocking in astonishment, put on her spectacles, and took the book.

"Why, these are old Cordula's scrawlings!" she said, crossly, but began to read.

The professor put his left hand behind his back and, stroking his beard with the right, paced silently up and down the room.

"I can't see what interest this childish love affair with the shoemaker's son has for me!" she cried, peevishly, after reading two pages. "What put it into your head to bring me the old rubbish? It poisons the whole room with its moldy smell."

"Pray read on, mother!" said the professor impatiently, "you will soon forget the odor of mold in far worse things the volume contains."

She opened it again with visible reluctance, and glanced over several pages. Gradually the stony face became animated, the rustling leaves were turned more swiftly. A faint flush tinged her white face, suddenly deepening on the forehead to a vivid scarlet. Strangely enough, however, the lady felt neither alarm nor horror—she showed only intense astonishment, soon blended with unutterable contempt, as she let the book fall into her lap.

"These are strange things, indeed! Who would ever have thought it! The honorable, highly-esteemed Hellwigs!" she cried, striking her hands together—bate, triumph, and gratified malice all strove for mastery in her voice. "So the money-bags of which my mother-in-law was so proud, were stolen property! Ha! ha! she rustled in silk and velvet, gave balls where champagne flowed in rivers, and her flatterers called her a beautiful and clever woman. And I had to attend these noisy guests! No one, in the presence of the frivolous, wanton woman, heeded the poor young relative, who, in her virtue and her fear of the Lord, stood far above all those miserable revelers. How often I had clinched my teeth, and prayed in my heart to God to punish this wicked rioting, according to his justice. He had already condemned them. Oh, how marvelous are His ways! It was stolen money they wasted—their souls are doubly lost!"

The professor stood motionless in the middle of the room. This method of regarding the matter was so totally unexpected, that he remained silent a moment in bewilderment.

"I do not understand how you can hold my grandmother responsible for using this embezzled money, mother," he said, indignantly, after a short pause. "She was ignorant of the secret. According to that idea, our souls must be lost, too, since we have continued to spend the interest of this sum until now. But, as this is your opinion, you will agree with me that we must get rid of this sinful, stolen gold as soon as possible, and return every farthing to its owners."

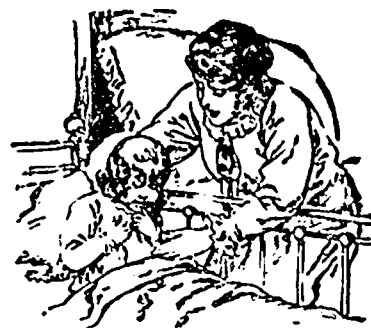
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